

THE OTTOMAN DOMINATION

(Reprinted from *The Round Table*

T. FISHER UNWIN, Ltd.
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1917

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When President Wilson asked the belligerents for a statement of their aims, the Allies gave, among their conditions, the expulsion of the Ottoman Empire from Europe and the liberation of the peoples subject to its rule. They described the Ottoman State as "radically alien to Western Civilisation," and its methods of government as a "murderous tyranny." These charges will be found, on examination, to be entirely true, and the remedies to be the least that will cure the evil. But they also imply that the just and enduring settlement which the Allies desire is quite incompatible with the *status quo* in Turkey, and it is therefore important to realise what the Ottoman Empire was before the War, and what it has become since entering into it.

The political map is deceptive. On the map the area marked "Turkey" is rounded off and coloured in like the areas marked "Italy" or "France" or "Great Britain"; and as a proposal to partition these would be regarded on all hands as a political crime, so the like proposal in regard to Turkey might seem, to anyone judging merely by the map, to be at any rate an aggression. The difference between the two cases is not apparent on the face of them, and calls for explanation.

How did these different areas take their colour? In other words, what has been the history of the States that have made these territories their own?

Their differences appear in their origin. Those States which on the map are indistinguishable from Turkey are national States. Their claim to integrity rests on the common desire of the inhabitants of their territory, and the inhabitants feel this desire either because they originally found the land empty and spread over it from a single stock, like the American nation; or because they lived in the land politically disunited, and then united the land and themselves by a common act of will, like the Italian nation in the Risorgimento; or because the territory grew gradually by conquest or inheritance, and democracy kept pace with expansion, so that old and new citizens combined into a single free community—the history of England and France. The Ottoman Empire, on the other hand, is not a national State. It has not grown by willing co-operation between neighbours, but by the domination of a military power over what might have been nations, or parts of nations, if Ottoman militarism had not cut them short. And this military domination has never improved its original character. Of the peoples conquered by it, some have shaken off its yoke again and some remain under it still. But none have been assimilated by it, none have become willing members of its body politic.

The breaking up of Turkey is not the destruction of a living commonwealth, but a liberation of enslaved peoples from prison, a clearing of the ground for the commonwealths which these peoples are at last to build. This is not a theoretical argument, but a fact of history, for the break-up of Turkey is not a new thing. It has been happening

for two centuries. The Balkan War of 1912-13 was its penultimate stage, and it has already added six nations to the independent States of Europe.

This Ottoman Power, which has overshadowed so many lands and peoples in Asia and Europe, sprang from small beginnings. Its founder was chief of a little troop of Turkish nomads, who in the 13th century wandered into Asia Minor from Central Asia. The Turkish Sultans already established in the country let the wanderer carve himself out a camping-place on their north-western marches—the hill country behind the Asiatic shores of the Sea of Marmora, looking down upon what was then a Greek coast belonging to the Byzantine Empire. The founder's son turned the camping-ground into a State, and, taking the name of Osman on his conversion from paganism to Islam, bequeathed it to his successors. The Osmanlis are those who have carried on what Osman began—and they have been faithful to his ideas. In less than three centuries they added to Osman's few square miles of hill country, till their territory stretched from Hungary and Algiers and the Crimea to the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, and they won the whole of it by military technique. The Osmanlis expanded because they had better drill, better artillery, better military roads than the peoples they overthrew; and they have staved off their extinction by becoming ready pupils of those who have surpassed them in the military art. They have borrowed from Prussia their ability to fight in the present War; the instinct for soldiering is the Osmanli's one and inalienable characteristic.

No other military State has ever so remorselessly exploited its human material. Prussia grew by the conscription of the conquered. The Silesians conquered from Austria in 1740 were drilled to fight against her in 1866; the Hanoverians conquered in 1866 were sent as *canonenfutter* against France in 1870; the Alsatians conquered in 1870 are manning the German trenches at Monastir and Pinsk. But the Osmanlis' system was Spartan. They did not take a mere toll of years from grown men's lives, but men's whole lives from infancy—a tribute of so many children from each subject Christian family, every so many years. These children were separated for ever from their families at the earliest possible age, educated in a military school as Moslems, and drafted into a standing army, fanatically devoted to their corps, the Osmanli Sultan and Islam, and with no other ties in the world. The Janissaries (or "New Model Army"—as, indeed, they were) made the Ottoman conquests, and each fresh people they brought under the Ottoman domination became a fresh recruiting-ground. The Ottoman Empire spread with a disastrous momentum, engulfing free peoples and destroying well-grown States—the Byzantine Empire, which had preserved at Constantinople the heritage of Ancient Greek Civilisation; the young, vigorous kingdoms of Bulgaria, Serbia, Bosnia, Hungary; the Roumanian principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia; the Albanian tribesmen; the Greek and French and Italian lordships in the Ægean Islands and Peloponnesus. All these were overthrown by the Osmanlis in Europe, and in

'Asia their conquests were as thorough and as wide. They conquered impartially, not only Christians but Moslems, not only Moslems but Turks. Their bitterest enemies were the kindred Turkish States of Asia Minor, especially the Sultanate of Karaman, in the heart of the peninsula. When they had overthrown Karaman, they conquered southward and eastward—Armenia and Mesopotamia from the Shahs of Persia, Syria and Egypt and the Holy Cities from the Mamelukes, lesser Armenia and Trebizond from their national Christian princes. Their hand was against every man's, and none whom they conquered became reconciled to their rule.

Ottoman policy towards conquered peoples has passed through three phases—all bad, but each worse than the last. The first phase may be called the policy of neglect, and Sultan Mohammed II., who conquered Constantinople in 1453 and organised what he and his predecessors since Osman had acquired, may stand as its author. This policy regarded the subject peoples simply as raw material for the production of Ottoman requirements—tribute in children and tribute in kind for the Osmanli Sultan's army, and peasant labour for the estates of the “beys” or feudal retainers whom the Sultans planted on the richest part of the conquered soil. Beyond these servitudes—which were as barbarically simple as Ottoman militarism itself—the Ottoman Empire had no use for its subject peoples. They were beyond the Osmanli's social pale; or, rather, they were not, in his eyes, even human, but “Rayah”—cattle—who might fore-

gather in any kind of herd they liked so long as they submitted to be milked and slaughtered. Provided they remained docile, it was to the Osmanlis' interest that they should shepherd themselves, and Mohammed II. encouraged the formation of "millets," or subject national communities, within the Ottoman State. The "millets" (the most important of which were the Armenian and the Greek) were ostensibly ecclesiastical corporations. At the head of each there was a Patriarch and Council resident in Constantinople, who exercised authority over their nationality through a hierarchy of metropolitans, bishops and village priests. But there was little trace of religion in the institution. The clergy were raised to power by the Osmanlis because they were the only corporate organisation in the subject peoples which Ottoman conquest had not destroyed. As the last national rallying point, they retained an influence over their countrymen which the Ottoman Government could not override, and, in return for the recognition of it, they undertook to wield it as Ottoman officials. The Patriarchs of the "millets" were more than religious primates. The administration of civil law among their nationals was largely left in their hands, and their jurisdiction was supported by the force of the Ottoman State. In addition to this licensed measure of self-government, there was much actual liberty among the Sultan's less accessible subjects —islanders and bedouin and mountaineers. It has been said of this phase of Ottoman domination that countries and peoples prospered under it in proportion to their neglect by the Ottoman Government,

and it is certainly true that all the good that has come out of the territory painted Ottoman on the map, since and so long as this territory has been in Ottoman power, has come in spite of, and never through the agency of, the Ottoman Government, and would have been infinitely greater if that Government had never expanded from its original restricted seat.

The only merits, then, of Ottoman policy in this first phase were its indifference and neglect, which gave its subjects liberty to prosper if they could. But this phase only lasted while the Osmanlis were a conquering power, and their military machine, like every other that has ever been made, had a limited span of vitality. The invincible Janissaries sank first into a hereditary militia, then into a privileged shopkeeping class. Their privileges were for their sons, and new Christian recruits became unwelcome interlopers. In the 17th century the tribute of children was abandoned, through the jealousy of the Janissaries themselves, not through the humanitarianism of the Ottoman Government. The military basis of Ottoman domination was sapped, and during the next two centuries the Ottoman territory shrank almost as rapidly as it had expanded before. A good Government would have arrested dissolution by making life worth living for the subject peoples within the Ottoman frontiers, and so giving them a positive interest in the preservation of the Ottoman State. It would have granted fuller self-government to the "millets," more unrestricted freedom to the islanders and bedouin and mountaineers. It would have enlisted the warlike qual-

ties of the Albanians, the seamanship of the Greeks, the horsemanship of the Arabs, the business ability of the Syrians, Armenians and Jews, the industry of the Bulgarian and Anatolian peasantry, and would have drawn all these elements together into a national State. Such things were done by the Governments—military, too, in their origin—which created England and France. But between the Osmanlis and those they had conquered a great gulf remained, which the Osmanlis never attempted to bridge. As the Osmanlis were beaten in war, their subject peoples broke away—some to find a better life under other States, some to found new national States of their own, but all outside the Ottoman dominion and only at the expense of its territorial integrity.

Instead of conciliating their subjects, the Osmanlis began to feel that they could no longer afford to leave them the liberty they had allowed them in the past. The subject peoples must no longer be permitted to make the best of themselves; on the contrary, they must be made weaker and more wretched than they were. Towards the end of the 19th century, when the complete extinction of the Ottoman Empire was in sight, this feeling was framed into a new policy by Sultan Abd-ul-Hamid.

Hamidianism was the second phase of Ottoman domination. Starting with the absence of any impulse to build an Ottoman nationality, but facing the fact that, as Osmanli rule grew weaker, one subject people after another was awaking to a national life of its own, Abd-ul-Hamid decided to

exploit these national movements within his Empire by turning them against one another. Instead of developing what was good in themselves, they should be egged on to maim and warp the development of their neighbours. All would thus be weakened more rapidly even than the Sultan's own Government, and he would be making the integrity of his territory secure as he made the inhabitants of it disillusioned and miserable.

Abd-ul-Hamid reigned from 1876 to 1908, and carried his policy out. He ruined the "millets"—not by erecting a Bulgarian Exarchate, which was a just and beneficial act in itself, but by granting this Exarchate jurisdiction over populations which the Greek Patriarchate had a right to consider its own. Bulgarian ambition was stimulated, Greek jealousy was aroused, and the two chief national bodies in the Osmanlis' remaining Balkan territory were drawn into a fratricidal conflict, which absorbed their energies for evil instead of good. By about 1890 Greek and Bulgarian "bands" had been formed in Macedonia, which "converted" the Macedonian villagers from the Patriarchate to the Exarchate, or *vice versa*, and back again, by descending upon them alternately and terrorising or massacring all villagers who held to the opposite allegiance. The Osmanli gendarmerie did not suppress these bands. They contented themselves with burning a village now and then—"for harbouring them," though the bandsmen were the least welcome guests the villagers had ever received. As the anarchy and bloodshed in Macedonia grew worse, the free Balkan States were brought to the

verge of war on behalf of their suffering fellow-countrymen, and the relations of the Great Powers were strained by the fear that a Balkan outbreak might upset the balance between them. And both these catastrophes occurred within a few years of Abd-ul-Hamid's deposition. The Balkan Wars of 1912-13—first of the Balkan League against the Ottoman Empire, and then of the confederates against each other—were the direct fruit of Abd-ul-Hamid's policy; and the European War, so far as it was produced by Balkan causes, lies also at his door. This was the Macedonian policy of Abd-ul-Hamid, and it was perpetrated simply in order that certain territories in Europe, which the Osmanlis had no more right to govern than those from which they had been ejected already, should remain Ottoman on the political map.

The same bloodshed and anarchy, with the same purpose, were fomented by Abd-ul-Hamid wherever he ruled. Having set the Bulgars against the Greeks, he encouraged the Albanians to harry the Serbs. The Albanian tribesmen came down from their mountains and evicted the Serbian peasantry from their ancestral villages in the plains of Kossovo, while the Ottoman Government looked on and the free Serbs beyond the frontier were unable to interfere. But the Sultan's chosen instruments were the Kurds—a race of mountain shepherds in the eastern Asiatic provinces, whom previous Sultans had tried to reduce to order, but whom Abd-ul-Hamid armed with modern rifles and organised into “Hamidian Gendarmerie” for use against the Armenians.

To rob and murder the Armenians was the service asked of the Kurds and the reward given them for it; and here, as in Macedonia, the policy produced bloodshed and anarchy after Abd-ul-Hamid's heart. The Armenians formed counter-organisations; some mountain communities broke into revolt. The Kurds were at once reinforced by Osmanli regulars, the fanaticism of the Turkish Mohammedans in Asia Minor was stirred up, and during the years 1896-7 there were massacres of Armenians from one end of the Empire to the other, culminating in a butchery in the streets of Constantinople. Before the Sultan had to yield to foreign indignation, he had killed enough Armenian men, women and children to weaken the Armenian nation for a generation ahead.

Abd-ul-Hamid was overthrown by a coalition of revolutionaries from two of the nations he mis-governed, the Anatolian Turks and the Salonica Jews, who controlled, between them, the army and finance. Under the name of the "Young Turkish Party," this cabal has ruled the Ottoman Empire since then. It is a secret committee, with branch committees affiliated to it in the chief towns of the Empire, and the Sultan, Ministry, Parliament and Bureaucracy which it has set up are all puppets in its hands. This secret committee—of "Union and Progress," as it styles itself—brought the Ottoman Empire into the European War, in order to obtain a free hand for a new policy of domination, which is the worst of all.

The first phase of Ottoman policy towards subject peoples was neglect, the Hamidian was attri-

tion; but the Young Turkish phase is extermination, and the Young Turks are carrying it out at this moment by every means in their power.

They are "Nationalists," but they do not aim at turning the territory still marked Ottoman on the map into a national State, like Italy or France or Great Britain or the American Union—States in which all the inhabitants of the country are willing citizens with equal rights. That may figure in the Young Turkish programme, but it is too alien to the Osmanli tradition for any Ottoman Government to undertake it, even if the Hamidian phase had not gone before to make it impossible. The Young Turks know that no subject people will now remain under Ottoman dominion by choice; the problem is to fetter them under it by force. The Young Turkish motto is "Ottomanisation," which means that Turkish habits, education, religion, but above all language, are to be imposed upon every people within the Ottoman frontiers, and that those who cannot be coerced are to be eliminated.

This policy is borrowed from Central Europe, where for the last fifty years 60,000,000 Germans have been engaged in "Prussianising" about 6,000,000 Alsatians, Danes and Poles, and 10,000,000 Magyars more than their own number of Slovaks, Ruthenes, Roumanians and Southern Slavs. The Young Turks have set themselves to impose the nationality of 8,000,000 Turkish-speaking peasants in Anatolia upon almost twice as many people of other races, the majority of whom are their superiors in civilisation. In the "Report of Progress" submitted to the Young Turkish party

congress in October, 1911, it was laid down that "sooner or later the complete Ottomanisation of all Turkish subjects must be carried out. It is clear, however," the report continued, "that this result can never be reached by persuasion, but that armed force will have to be resorted to. . . . The other nationalities must be denied the right of organisation, for decentralisation and autonomy are treason to the Turkish Empire. The nationalities are a *quantité négligeable*. They may keep their religion but not their language."

The Ottoman Government emerged from the Balkan War of 1912-13 with a territory reduced to Thrace, Constantinople, the Straits and the Provinces in Asia, and a population of between 20 and 25 millions (statistics are inexact). In this population there were about 8,000,000 Turks, nearly all living north of a line drawn from Alexandretta to Van; 7,000,000 Arabs (Moslem or Christian) to the south of that line; 2,000,000 Armenians and 2,000,000 Greeks, scattered over the northern half of the Empire, the Greeks mostly to the west and the Armenians to the east; and from two to three million semi-independent hillmen—Kurds, Kizil-Bashis, Yezidis, Maronites, Druses, Nestorians and others. Many of these races of the Empire were represented among the million or so inhabitants of Constantinople. About half of these inhabitants were Turks; there were 150,000 Armenians and 150,000 Greeks; a handful of Kurds and Arabs; a strong colony of Jews, and an important foreign commercial population. Constantinople was, and remains, a cosmopolitan city.

This was the Young Turks' field for Ottomanisation. They have been dealing with it piece by piece. Between the end of the Balkan War and their intervention in the European War they dealt with Thrace, the only province left to them in Europe. In 1913 the population of Thrace was predominantly Greek, with a Turkish element round Adrianople and some Bulgarians in the mountains towards the north-east. A year later only Turks were left; Greeks and Bulgarians had been driven out across the frontier, stripped of their property and their lands. If the Young Turks now claim Thrace as a purely Turkish country, it is well to know how and when it became so. The "Ottomanisation" of Thrace is the most conclusive argument for expelling the Ottoman Empire from Europe as "radically alien to Western Civilisation."

At the same time the Young Turks began driving out the Greeks from the western coastlands of Asia Minor. They meant to "solve" their Greek problem altogether, and the kingdom of Greece was on the verge of a second war with the Ottoman Empire on this account, when the European War supervened. As Allies of Germany, the Young Turks, for reasons of common policy, had to give their Greek subjects a respite; but, in compensation, they had a freer hand to settle with the other races than they had ever had before. They need no longer stop at eviction and attrition; they could massacre on an infinitely greater scale than Abd-ul-Hamid ever dared to do, and no foreign power could restrain them so long as they had Germany's countenance and military support.

The Young Turks are using their opportunity. The extermination of the 2,000,000 Armenians is already an accomplished fact. About two-thirds of them were "deported"—men, women and children—hundreds of miles, for weeks on end, over roadless mountains, to the semi-tropical swamps and deserts on the Empire's southern fringes. About half the exiles reached their destinations, and have been dying there since of starvation, exposure and disease. The other half died of exhaustion on the way, or were murdered by the gendarmes who escorted them and by organised bands of brigands and Kurds. A third of the nation may still be alive—the Armenians in Constantinople and Smyrna were mostly spared; a certain number escaped by conversion to Islam (though this, for women and girls, involved entrance into a Moslem's harem); about 200,000 escaped to Russia and Egypt. These 200,000 refugees—10 per cent. of the Armenians living under Ottoman domination in 1914—are the only Ottoman Armenians whose preservation is assured.

After eliminating the Armenians, the Young Turks prepared the same fate for the Arabs, and they have been engaged on this since 1916. The Arabs in the southern provinces have been able to defend themselves. The province of Yemen, in the hinterland of Aden, has been in chronic revolt for years, and the Young Turks have abandoned the attempt to subdue its national rulers. The province of Hedjaz, which contains the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, reasserted its independence a few months ago under the leadership of the Sherif

of Mecca, who is the hereditary custodian of the holy cities. But Syria, still held down by Ottoman armies, is being Ottomanised with might and main. The Syrian leaders (Moslem or Christian without distinction, for their common crime is that they are Arabs and not Turks) are either dead or in prison; the next blow will fall on the helpless masses. It is the same method as with the Armenians—the same organised direction from the “Union and Progress” Committee at Constantinople—and it will have the same end unless changes in the military situation intervene.

The whole Young Turkish policy was summed up in a sentence by an Osmanli gendarme to a Danish Red Cross Sister: “First we kill the Armenians, then the Greeks, then the Kurds.” The issue resolves itself into a question of time. Which will be destroyed first? The subject peoples or the Ottoman domination?

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